

A POSSIBLE PENDANT OF MARL FROM DEVIL'S LAIR, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

A perforated fragment of marl recovered from a part of the Devil's Lair cave deposit radiocarbon dated 12 000 to 19 000 BP is interpreted as a possible pendant.

In 1973 Western Australian Museum excavators recovered a small perforated piece of stone, possibly an ornamental pendant (Fig. 1), from the floor deposit in Devil's Lair cave in the 'Coastal Limestone' of extreme south-western Western Australia. This specimen, registered B3653 in the Western Australian Museum archaeological collection, is from Trench 8₇, layer 0, depth 136-142 cm below Cave Datum (*cf.* stratigraphical sections in Dortch 1979 a, 1979 b, 1979 c). An age of perhaps 14 000 BP for this specimen is suggested by interpolation of two pairs of radiocarbon dates, respectively 12 000 and 19 000 BP, for layers above and below layer 0 (Dortch 1979 b, Table 1; Dortch and Merrilees 1973, Table 1).

Dr A.E. Cockbain, Western Australian Geological Survey, has identified the light grey stone as a marl with scattered, rounded quartz grains, and states that it is not typical of the south-western 'Coastal Limestone' though it could have come from an interdunal swamp within this formation (*pers. comm.* A.E. Cockbain). It is suggested here that a human being brought the piece into Devil's Lair or its immediate vicinity.

The object weighs 18.65 gm; it has a maximum thickness of 12 mm; a maximum length of 55 mm; and its central perforation is 6.5 mm in diameter. With the exception of three fracture surfaces terminating its lower neck-like extremity (as oriented in Fig. 1) the piece has generally softly rounded or blunted edges. These three fracture surfaces do not seem to be as weathered as the rest of the piece, suggesting that it may not be complete; only the largest fracture (measuring 12 x 7 mm) could represent the removal of a relatively large amount of material.

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Recent re-examination of the object's surfaces, including the edges of the perforation, shows no definite marks of artificial shaping (*cf.* Dortch 1979 b, p. 269). Yet it is considered that the perforation was produced by boring or gouging perhaps from both faces, judging by its asymmetric biconical section, formed by an adjacent hollow on each face (*cf.* Fig. 1). Possibly these hollows result from abrasion by a gouging tool wielded at a very low angle so that its shaft was in contact with a part of the face adjacent to the perforation.

No function has been determined for this object. Since the stone is soft it could have served as pigment; or the perforation could perhaps have been used for polishing the tips or shafts of wooden artifacts or of bone points as found in the Devil's Lair deposit (Dortch 1979 b). In the absence of more plausible functions it is conceivable that the piece is an ornamental pendant.



Fig. 1: Photograph and scale drawing of a possible pendant of marl from Devil's Lair, Western Australia.

Its resemblance in plan view to the profile of a bird's head, e.g. a Wood Duck, may be purely fortuitous though this possibility, however remote, should be considered. It may be significant that the position of the perforation is essential to the bird's head likeness; in other possible positions, even a few mm away, the resemblance would be very much decreased. It should also be noted that the two faces of the beak-like protuberance converge at an acute angle to form a narrow though still smoothly contoured edge.

The least that can be said about this object is that it is humanly transported. Following that, it is reasoned that it is probably an artifact, and is possibly an ornament, judging by its size, weight and pendant-like appearance, and the absence of any features suggesting a utilitarian function. If the object is a perforated stone pendant it is by far the oldest known example of this rare Australian artifact class (cf. McBryde 1968, pp. 82-83; Massola 1970). Because of the object's weathered condition there seems no way of confirming the possibility of its being an artifact by means of microscopic examination; and it is virtually impossible to assess the likelihood of its being an ornament given the very limited data presently available for late Pleistocene Aboriginal material culture. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to assume that the occupants of Devil's Lair, who manufactured a variety of sophisticated stone and bone artifacts including bone beads (Dortch 1979 a, 1979 b), were also capable of making and perhaps disposed to wearing perforated stone pendants; if they were it is plausible that some could have been shaped to represent familiar species.

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